

II: RADIO, ELECTRICALS AND ALL THAT JAZZ

The technological and musical revolution heard 'round the world

All the while that the record industry was growing and expanding, other technological advances were slowly growing and gaining perfection. Films were one; thanks to the technological innovations of Pathé and the creative experiments of such directors as Georges Méliès, F.W. Murnau and D.W. Griffith, they reached by the end of the 'teens a surprisingly high level of achievement. But films were an obvious form of media growth: they were in the public eye and even influenced the culturally proficient. (Many people still do not know that the great tenor Enrico Caruso actually proposed marriage to actress Billie Burke—who much later in life gained immortality as Glenda in “The Wizard of Oz”—on the strength of her radiant presence in the movies. She jilted him.) Much less obvious to the general public were some behind-the-scenes experiments that were being perfected in laboratories around the world.

Most students of media history know how in 1894, at age 20, Guglielmo Marconi invented his spark transmitter with antenna at his home in Bologna. He took his “black box” to Great Britain in February 1896 and, though it was broken by custom officials, he filed for a patent on 2 June 1896 and began to build his world empire of Marconi companies.

Less well-known, but equally as important in the long run, was a Danish inventor named Valdemar Poulsen. On 1 December 1898—at about the same time that Berliner discs and Bettini cylinders were really getting off the ground—he patented the first magnetic recorder, called the “telegraphone,” which used steel wire. This device was exhibited at the Paris Exposition in 1900, and impressed investors enough that he was able to form the American Telegraphone Company in November 1903, after Congress approved his patent. Twenty years later, Poulsen’s patent expired; quite by circumstance, this coincided with the end of World War I, at which point Germany developed improvements to the wire telegraphone. Fifteen years later, wire recorders achieved widespread use in Germany, to record arts broadcasts as well as Hitler’s speeches.

Yet perhaps the most important event took place in almost complete obscurity, not discovered until decades after it happened. On 12 and 13 January 1910, American radio pioneer Lee De Forest arranges the world’s first radio broadcast to the public—or, perhaps more accurately, to a very small segment of some of the public—directly from Metropolitan Opera House. He used two microphones and a 500-watt transmitter. According to the 1989 edition of the *Annals of the Metropolitan Opera*, “In a pioneering effort, two decades before radio became an important aspect of the company’s activities, parts of (Puccini’s) *Tosca* (January 12, 1910) and complete performances of (Mascagni’s) *Cavalleria Rusticana* and (Leoncavallo’s) *I Pagliacci* (January 13, 1910) were broadcast. Few could hear the transmission as the sound quality was poor.” The cast of Puccini’s *Tosca* on January 12 featured Olive Fremstad as Floria Tosca, Pasquale Amato as Baron Scarpia and Riccardo Martin as Cavaradossi, the tenor lead.

In his 1950 autobiography *Father of Radio*, De Forest wrote:

For my debut in broadcasting of opera, [Metropolitan Opera House assistant director Andreas] Dippel suggested the double bill of *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *I Pagliacci*. The Acousticon microphone was located in the footlights, but for the opening aria, ‘La Siciliana,’ in *Cavalleria*, which was sung behind the curtain, a duplicate microphone was located on a small table before which Ricardo Martin stood when he sang that aria. Then before the curtains were withdrawn for the

opening scene, this microphone and the wires and table were swiftly removed from sight. For Caruso, as Canio in *Pagliacci*, the microphone was installed in the footlights.

Of course, nothing exists of these broadcasts, and very few people actually heard them, but they were successful, thus paving the way for further refinements that eventually led to commercial radio. In the fall of 1920, Pittsburgh station KDKA became the very first to receive “call letters” from the newly-formed FCC; they broadcast for one hour a night, from 9:30 to 10:30 p.m. One of their very first broadcasts was the returns of the 1920 Presidential election. In 1922, a cultural landmark occurred when the New York Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra became the first classical orchestra to broadcast regularly on the airwaves. A snippet of the 17 December 1923 broadcast exists, an incomplete performance of Beethoven’s “Coriolanus” Overture conducted briskly and with crackling tension by a little-known Dutch conductor, Willem van Hoogstraten. This is a true rarity, an electrical recording made during what was still the acoustic era, but its success as a recording (though there were few machines then capable of playing it back properly) led to the swift development and commercialization of electrical recording two years later.

Meanwhile, of course, acoustic recordings continued to be made, and from about 1918 onward the major labels, Victor and Columbia (along with their European counterparts), made great strides in the preservation of sound. Both orchestral and piano accompaniments were sounding, if not natural, fuller and less cramped than their predecessors. Edison, too, made great strides in those days, but since his records could only be played back really well on his own phonographs, only the wealthy who could or would buy two phonographs bothered much with them.

In 1918, an entirely new kind of opera singer made her debut at the Metropolitan. This was Rosa Ponselle, the daughter of a poor pizza baker in Meriden, Connecticut. Though her family came from Italy, she and her older sister Carmela were born in the U.S. Showing a great gift for singing, the family struggled to pay for both of the girls to take private singing lessons, but neither had a formal music education of any kind. By 1914 Carmela was a vaudeville singer; two years later, 19-year-old Rosa joined her, and they became well-known on the New York circuit as “Those Tailored Girls,” coming out in suits and singing mock-operatic versions of hits of the day. One of Rosa’s specialties was Victor Herbert’s “Kiss Me Again,” which she finally recorded many years later. Together they would sing songs like “Comin’ Thro’ the Rye,” to which they added the cadenza from the duet “Mira, o Norma” from Bellini’s opera. It was great fun. But in 1918 Enrico Caruso, wanting to sing Verdi’s “La Forza del Destino” at the Met but being told that there were no sopranos capable of partnering him (both Emmy Destinn and Johanna Gadski had departed the year before), went to the New York Palace Theater where he heard Rosa Ponselle and was astonished by her voice. He quickly arranged for an audition with Met general manager Giulio Gatti-Casazza. Ponselle was so nervous that she fainted, but Gatti was likewise impressed and, after a second audition which went well, she was hired and made her debut with Caruso in November 1918.

The Ponselle case is quite probably unique in the entire history of opera. Certainly, other great singers came from humble backgrounds, including many stars of that time: Bessie Abbot (who also sang in vaudeville before moving on to classical), Leo Slezak, Richard Tauber, Feodor Chaliapin, Alexander Kipnis, and of course Caruso himself. But all of them had formal classical training of one sort or another, if not provided by their families then provided by “angels” and/or the opera companies in which they slowly but surely rose to prominence. Ponselle truly had none. The words and notes were drilled into her head at rehearsals,

but the rest was entirely up to her. Fortunately, she was a quick study and adept at mimicking the styles of her colleagues. In the company of Caruso, Martinelli, de Luca and Louise Homer, she learned how to phrase competently; and a few years later, when conductor Tullio Serafin came to the Metropolitan, she learned how to sing like a goddess.

All of this was played out on the records she made between 1918 and 1930. After her sensational first few performances as Leonora in “Forza del Destino,” a record executive came backstage to her dressing room and offered her an exclusive five-year contract. She thought she was signing with Victor, Caruso’s label; but she quickly discovered that she had signed with Columbia, Victor’s arch-rival for the American market. Caruso himself was devastated, as he envisioned making duet records with her; but Columbia, using her as a magnet, soon attracted other great singers to their label, including the Italian baritone Riccardo Stracciari. This was the first time in recording history that a rival label had made a coup of an artist destined for another, and it was a lesson that would not be lost on Columbia or any other company.

By way of compensation, Victor managed to convince one of the world’s greatest conductors, Arturo Toscanini, to finally record when his La Scala Orchestra made a triumphant tour of the U.S. in 1920-21. The Toscanini records were ballyhooed with promotional marketing that more than rivaled Caruso’s: indeed, his recordings mark the very first time that *only* the artist’s last name was used on a record label. Toscanini took great exception to this and quickly left the label when they refused to put both his names on the records; but in part his decision to stop recording was that he was unhappy with the sound his orchestra made on them, improvements or no improvements. Reduced to perhaps forty pieces, the La Scala Orchestra sounded like a marching band with Stroh violins added. Toscanini hated these recordings for the remainder of his long life.



Nevertheless, the early 1920s saw several landmark orchestral recordings produced in Europe. The early 1920s saw recordings of complete symphonies by conductor Thomas Beecham, complete violin concerti by Fritz Kreisler, and the first recordings of modern works such as Stravinsky’s “Sacre du Printemps,” Mahler’s “Resurrection” symphony (conducted by his friend Oskar Fried), and Gustav Holst’s popular orchestral suite “The Planets” (conducted by the composer). HMV made an extensive series of recordings of excerpts from Wagner’s operas with soprano Florence Austral, whose bright, silvery yet large voice recorded well, tenor Tudor Davies, and the London Symphony under the direction of Albert Coates, a Russian-born conductor who was one of Nikisch’s prize pupils. Victor took advantage of this treasure-trove, issuing the records on their blue label series.

But Victor took several hits during those years that weakened its financial, if not artistic, position in the record industry. First of these was the unexpected fatal illness of Caruso who, after making his last records for the company in early 1920, was forced to return to his native Italy for rest and treatment. He died of pleurisy caused by a burst abscess on his lungs in 1921. The next was its loss, along with rival Columbia, to the exclusive use of Eldridge Johnson’s patent on lateral-cut recordings. And this challenge would come from an entirely unexpected source—a small record label produced in the “backwoods” of Indiana, which spurred the lawsuit heard ‘round the world.

The Gennett Lawsuit: The Mouse that Roared

In 1915 the Starr Piano Company of Richmond, Indiana decided to start producing phonographs and records, which were slowly replacing sheet music and player piano rolls as the preferred format for popular music. They established a division to produce discs in 1916, then constructed a recording studio in New York and began manufacturing their own phonographs. Their early records featured a green Starr label. In 1917 the company erected a building near their Whitewater Gorge factory complex devoted to the manufacture of phonographs and records. In 1917 they replaced the Starr label with one called Gennett after the surname of Starr's four Gennett brothers, Henry, Fred, Harry and Clarence, who were the company's principal executives.



There was absolutely nothing that was interesting or distinguished about Gennett records. Their sound was dull and dead, even by the standards of their time; one of the jazz musicians who later recorded for them said that it amazed him how music that sounded so alive and vibrant when played in the recording studio could sound D.O.A. on the very first playback. The early Gennett labels were likewise dull and plain, and their roster of artists ranked dead last among contemporary American labels. But in the early months of 1919, Starr converted to lateral recording; for several months, Gennett discs were offered in both formats before the vertical cut was finally abandoned in the summer of 1919. Starr's announcement that it was producing lateral discs, made in the Talking Machine World for March 15, 1919, triggered a lawsuit by the Victor Talking Machine Company (Victor Talking Machine Co. v. Starr Piano Co., 263 F. 82) in which Victor alleged that Starr had infringed Eldridge Johnson's patent #896,059.

Why Victor went after Gennett, with its insignificant roster of artists, when it had ignored Odeon with its much finer stock for years, remains a mystery. Speculation has it that they didn't mind a foreign label infringing on their patent, but the announcement in the U.S. industry's chief business organ—something Odeon had never bothered to do—made their violation of Johnson's patent much more flagrantly obvious and, since Gennett refused to pay the licensing fee for the Johnson patent, they had to be publicly defeated. Unfortunately, it didn't work out that way.

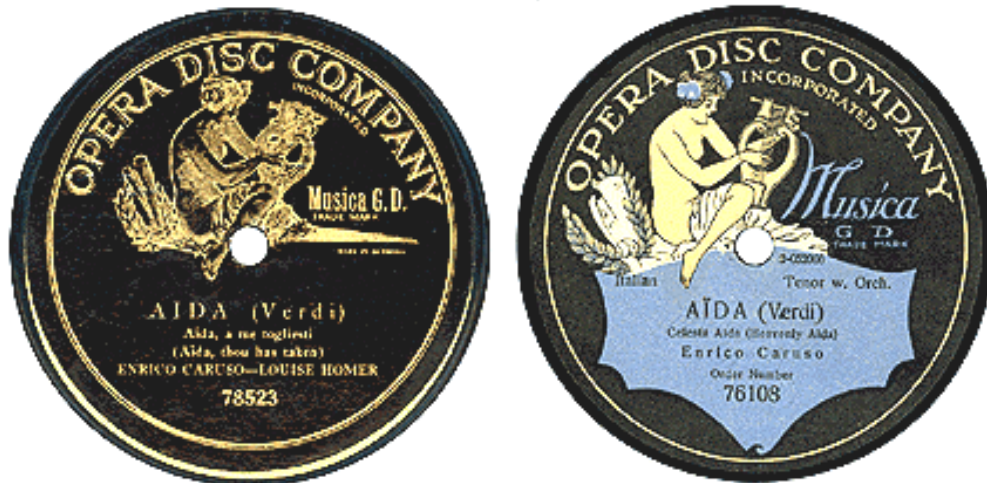
The Victor lawsuit didn't go well even from the very beginning. The crux of the matter, it seemed, was that Starr claimed the invention of its *own* system of lateral-cut recordings, different from that of Johnson's. They presented their case in court via photographs and films of their recording and mastering process in action—the first time that film was allowed as testimony in a court case. Emboldened by Victor's first defeat in court, other small American labels either sprung up anew or converted to lateral-cut discs using the Gennett process by mid-1920. Victor was in serious trouble now. They asked rivals Columbia and Compo, a Berliner offshoot, to join them in pursuing the suit to higher courts. At each level, the Victor alliance was defeated. Their final defeat came in 1922 when the Supreme Court ruled that the Eldridge Johnson patent was only valid insofar as Johnson's system—now a quarter-century outdated—was concerned.

Victor lost hundreds of thousands of dollars pursuing their suit against Starr/Gennett. But even more importantly, Starr's victory ensured that even the humblest rival label could now compete with them on their own terms, namely the lateral-cut record. And as badly as the lawsuit hurt Victor, it hurt struggling Columbia even more. In the fall of 1923, the Columbia Graphophone Company went into receivership, having previously sold its English

subsidiary. The English operation, in turn, helped provide financing to reorganize the successor, Columbia Phonograph Company. In 1924, the Canadian operation was sold to Canadian owners, although there was no change in the basic operation of the relationship to American and English firms. The English operation had, in fact, salvaged their American counterpart primarily to retain rights which were being negotiated with the Western Electric Company to the new electrical recording process.

And as if the Gennett headache wasn't enough, Victor sued a competitor in 1921 that was using its own masters against them.

In January 1921, Max Hesslein formed the Opera Disc Company, Inc., in New York to market classical and operatic recordings not only in direct competition with Victor's expensive Red Seals, but pressed from Victor's own masters. To obtain those masters, Opera Disc turned to Polyphonwerke Aktien-Gesellschaft of Berlin, which had originally been a part of Deutsche Grammaphon which pressed Victor and HMV discs in Germany. At the outbreak of World War I, Alexander Lucas took control of the company and seized the HMV and Victor matrices as "spoils of war." He licensed them back to newly-formed DGG, which in 1917 broke off to become a separate company. After the war, he tried to enter the American market on his own but didn't have enough capital, so he leased these old matrices to Hesslein.



Within months, Hesslein had one of the best classical catalogs in America. Among the stars on his label were Frances Alda, Lucrezia Bori, Enrico Caruso, Julia Culp, Marcel Journet, Feodor Chaliapin, Fritz Kreisler, Ignace Jan Paderewski, Antonio Scotti and Mattia Battistini, who were then under exclusive Victor contracts in the United States. A few of DGG's and Polyphon's own masters rounded out the series. Victor quickly sued Opera Disc, a suit which they won, but the company continued to issue catalogs into 1922. This time, Victor won the battle and the war, but they were depleting their financial resources.

Electrical Recording: Raising the Levels

One problem in writing a book like this on the early history of sound recording—mine or anyone else's—is that things did not happen one at a time, separately from everything else, but rather all at once, overlapping and conflicting with one another. Nevertheless, I have decided to separate the strands so that the reader can grasp more easily what was going on at this vibrant, exciting yet confusing time when the “media industry” was more or less created whole out of the scattered remnants of European musical culture and the recording business that had worked so hard to promote it.

One of these is, of course, the advent of electrical recording, which in turn developed out of radio. We have but briefly discussed the origins of radio, but I am holding off on its rapid development and the new post-War musical culture until such time as other aspects are covered. Still, since the advent of electrical recording marks one of the major turning-points in the history of captured sound, some attention should be paid to it as a separate entity.

Electrical recording was basically invented by shortening the wavelength of the band used in broadcasting. By "condensing" the sound within a few feet rather than several miles, it was found that the amount of sound recorded could be expanded from the previous 250-2,500 cycles range of acoustic recorders to a wider range of 50-6,000 cycles using the condenser microphone, tube amplifier, balanced-armature speaker, and a rubber-line acoustic recorder with a long tapered horn. It was this recording system that finally standardized recording speeds at 78 rpm for consumer 10- and 12-inch discs, and 33-1/3 rpm for professional Vitaphone 16-inch discs, the kind of records used for radio broadcasts and early sound films.

The two major players in this conversion process were Bell Laboratories, in conjunction with Western Electric, and Marsh Laboratories, an independent company from Chicago. Henry C. Harrison of Bell Labs developed the matched-impedance recorder to improve the frequency range. Orlando Marsh's system was cruder and far less efficient than Bell's, yet they were the first company to produce commercial electrical recordings on their own Auto-graph label.

The exact dating of the Marsh system has long been a mystery, as Orlando Marsh either did not keep exact records or had them destroyed to avoid corporate espionage. There is, however, a photograph from the January 13, 1923 issue of *The Billboard* of a Marsh Labs session showing a sound-collecting device that is obviously not a standard acoustic recording horn. Although the quality of the photo is such that it is impossible to see the device clearly, it appears similar to other enclosures Marsh is known to have used as sound-collectors for his carbon microphone. The wording of the text also strongly suggests a departure from the standard acoustic process.

Given a lead-time of several weeks for this story, and assuming the device is indeed electrical, it now seems safe to date Marsh's first commercial use of an electrical recording system to the latter



The Marsh Laboratory, Inc., 625 Kimball Bldg., Chicago, has a new process of making records which is a marvel of simplicity and effectiveness. A *Billboard* representative was present and watched them make a record for the Mid-West Music House of "Jane, Dear", which this company is featuring. Edna J. Allen Phillips has written both words and music, and, as this is one of the better type of ballads, it has been pronounced by a number of competent singers as one that is having quite a vogue, and when the records of this song are placed on the market its popularity ought to be greatly increased.

In the record as made of "Jane, Dear", Alexander Kominaky, Imperial Russian violinist, played the obligato; August E. Brodemeler, tenor, sang the words, with Mrs. Phillips at the piano.

The accompanying picture gives some idea of the simplicity of the recording device, and other lyceum and chautauqua companies should get this record and study this new method of reproduction, as it opens up many new possibilities for lyceum and chautauqua artists.

part of 1922. Marsh's own Autograph label, introduced in April 1924, used electrical masters exclusively, a year before Victor or Columbia began issuing their first electrical recordings.

Victor's first electrical recording was "Adeste fidelis" by the Associated Glee Clubs of America, recorded in a Philadelphia church in January 1925. Columbia hired Art Gillham, "The Whispering Pianist," to make their first electrical recording 25 February 1925, "You May Be Lonesome," released as Columbia 328-D. The sound of those first electrics, and many more than followed, did not make instant converts of the record-buying public, any more than CDs made an immediate impact on the LP industry sixty years later; but like the advent of CDs, the new electrics quickly overcame the market in just a few short years.

The problem with the sound of early electrics was not frequency range, but sound compression. By "boxing in" the sound in acoustically dead studios, the record companies created a sound that thumped and sputtered from the loudspeaker rather than pouring out in all its uncompressed glory. Ironically, as we shall soon see, this method of recording was primarily limited to classical recordings made in Camden. The popular and jazz records made in Victor's New York and Chicago studios had somewhat more ambience, more resonance than their classical cousins, but the "industry standard" then was that this tight, dry sound should "bloom" in the acoustic space of your living room—a philosophy that stayed with the record companies, especially the American record companies, well into the early LP era.

In 1926, three remarkable sets of recordings were made in England and Germany that caused a sizeable commotion in classical circles. Soprano Nellie Melba, an international star for thirty years, gave her farewell performance at Covent Garden; portions of this concert were recorded "live" by HMV and issued on records. Melba was astonished at the difference in sound quality, but also wise enough to realize that her voice had lost much of its early quality. "At last, I can hear myself properly," she was quoted as saying, "but too late—too late!"

The other two series of recordings were of the music of Richard Wagner. In January of that year, with a short follow-up session in March, Albert Coates conducted orchestral excerpts from *Der Ring des Nibelungen*: the Entrance of the gods into Valhalla from "Das Rheingold," the "Magic Fire Music" from *Die Walküre*, and two pieces from *Götterdämmerung*, the Prologue and Siegfried's Rhine journey and Siegfried's funeral march. Made in the natural resonance of the Royal Albert Hall, the extra "space" around the London Symphony Orchestra gave a natural balance to the various sections, especially the percussion, that was thrilling to hear. Then in Berlin, in October, bass Alexander Kipnis recorded a complete version of Wotan's Farewell from *Walküre* and Hans Sachs' monologue "Ansprache des Sachs" with Leo Blech and the Berlin State Opera Orchestra. The way in which both the orchestra and Kipnis' voice reverberated on these Electrola releases opened ears to the possibilities of finally recording Wagner's operas in a way that were musically as well as aurally valid. Unfortunately, they did not influence the Americans much, and even other German companies, particularly Deutsche Grammophon, continued to make tighter, drier recordings into the early 1930s.

In 1928, American Victor produced two complete orchestral works whose luscious sound quality rivaled that of the best European records: Strauss' tone poem *Ein Heldenleben* by Willem Mengelberg and the New York Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra, and Brahms' Third Symphony by Leopold Sto-



kowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra. Both conductors were so entranced that they endeavored to make recordings with “space” around them henceforth. But ironically, Mengelberg’s compatriot and co-director of the New York orchestra, Toscanini, preferred the tighter, drier sound because he liked being able to hear all sections clearly and cleanly, something that was patently impossible when natural reverberance slightly obscured and blended the sections. Though Toscanini’s 1929 electrics were made in Carnegie Hall, like Mengelberg’s *Heldenleben*, closer microphone placement resulted in a less luscious sound-space.

Another outstanding orchestral recording that had great musical and historical value was Berlioz’ “Symphonie Fantastique” by the Orchestre Symphonique de Paris conducted by Pierre Monteux. It was recorded in the Salle Pleyel, a hall that Monteux hated at first sight (“it looked more like a hangar for airplanes,” he complained), but eventually came to love for its naturalistic sound. The symphony had only been recorded once before, a rather tame reading by Felix Weingartner for Columbia in 1925-26. Monteux’s reading, using score indications for accents, tempo and phrasing as passed down to him from Berlioz himself by Edouard Colonne, was fiery, passionate yet very well-controlled. Monteux lost his hand-marked score in 1940 when the Nazis invaded his Paris home and stole all his belongings, so his later recordings of the symphony lacked some of this extraordinary detail – yet one more reason why recordings could be extremely important historically.

Electrical recording may have been too late for Melba, but not too late for Florence Easton, Lucrezia Bori, Maggie Teyte, Frida Leider or Florence Austral who, though they recorded pretty well on acoustics, had even more amplitude and impact on electrics. And, in the case of Ponselle, for whom (like Destinn) the overtones were at least half the voice, electrics gave a much more realistic if not altogether complete picture due to sonic compression. Furthermore, the early electrical era was a virtual golden age for German tenors, none of whom (unless you discount the Latvian Karl Jörn and the Dutchman Jacques Urlus) never recorded well on acoustics. For the first time, you could hear at least half the amplitude of such tenors as Slezak and Richard Tauber. Danish tenor Lauritz Melchior, banished by virtue of his extraordinarily large voice and baritonish timbre to the Wagnerian repertoire, also made his finest recordings during the early electrical period, 1926-1932; and this same period introduced two Germanic tenors who would have an enormous impact on the future of singing, Joseph Schmidt (who was actually born in Latvia) and Marcel Wittrisch (born in Belgium).

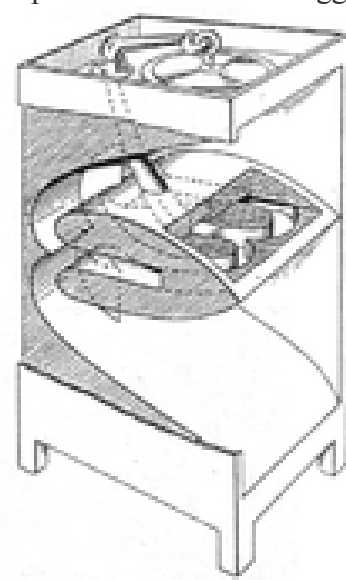
In fact, the artistic success of Coates’ orchestral Wagner, as well as Kipnis’ “Wotan’s farewell,” led HMV to produce huge chunks of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* on discs over the next several years. Coates conducted the bulk of these, though Leo Blech and Laurence Collingwood also made appearances. Austral was the Brünnhilde in most of these, with Frida Leider making an appearance now and then (most notably in the Rhine Journey duet with Melchior). Göta Ljungberg was the Sieglinde and Guttrune. The tenors were Melchior and a wonderful British Wagnerian, Walter Widdop, who made a tremendous impact and became a favorite Heldentenor of many auditors. Also during this period, Coates broke new artistic ground with the first complete recording of Bach’s massive Mass in B Minor. This recording reflected the Bach performance practice of his time: dense, rich orchestration, relatively slow tempi, lots of legato in the phrasing, and a “reverential” approach to the music that, like bel canto, became an anachronistic style thanks to its exposure on recordings. The artistic highlight of the set, however, was “Quoniam tu solus sanctus,” in which hornist Aubrey Brain and bass-baritone Friedrich Schorr (who also sang Wotan on some of the *Ring* sides) performed the aria with tremendous feeling and deep musicality.

Though in many ways records made “disembodied voices” of all singers, transporting their vocal cords into the homes of thousands who would never hear them in the flesh, the ma-

jority of the singers already mentioned had extensive stage careers, in Europe, America or both. One very rare exception was lyric soprano Lucy Isabelle Marsh, an American singer with a beautiful, soft-grained voice that was perfect for recording. Because she was a singer of high quality, she was quickly signed to a Victor contract, where she was the mainstay of their unusual “purple label” series for years. Her only acoustic Red Seal disc was the tomb scene from “Aida” with tenor John McCormack, but during the electrical era she was promoted to Red Seal for good. Yet though she eventually sang on the radio, Lucy Marsh was never seen on the opera stage. Photographs show why. She was a mulatto. Considering the social climate of the time, it showed great foresight that Victor’s Emilio de Gogorza made so many records by her, also that they were not afraid to place her photo in Victor’s record catalogs. Thus, Lucy Isabelle Marsh became the first classical singer with African-American blood to make records.

Another special case was Joseph Schmidt. From the first time he auditioned for Berlin Radio in 1928, singing the terribly demanding “Di quella pira” from “Il Trovatore,” he became an immediate sensation. For four years he sang an incredible array of roles on the radio in complete concert performances of operas from Mozart to Verdi. Yet he never gave a single performance on the stage during this period, nor did he sing in public concerts. When he finally made his first sound film in 1933, his public understood why. Schmidt was not only pretty homely, but unusually short; at four feet, ten inches tall, he was almost a midget. The incongruity of hearing that robust lyric tenor emerging from such a small frame, of course, made him a phenomenon that people *wanted* to see, and so there were more films, finally some public concerts, but only one stage performance as Rodolfo in “La Bohème.” Wearing platform shoes and with his hair teased into a pompadour, Schmidt looked ridiculous on the stage. It was an experiment that was not repeated.

By this time, the market for electrical recordings had indeed rendered the acoustic process obsolete. Only the cheapest and smallest labels were holding onto the acoustical process into 1927, but the handwriting was already on the wall. The acoustic process was now archaic. Ironically, this proved yet another financial hardship for Victor as their biggest-



[L] An early ad for the “utmost in performance,” the Orthophonic Victrola.

[C] The Columbia “Grafonola

[R] An internal look at the mechanism of the new electrical phonograph, simpler in design and easier to operate.

selling star opera singer of all time, Caruso, had only made records acoustically. For the first time, the company began reissuing his discs on double-sided records which had been the industry norm for popular and lesser classical artists for at least a decade. Even so, sales of Caruso records, after the initial shock of his death had worn off, plummeted as the new technology made them commercially obsolete.

One reason among many why the new electrical phonographs became popular was their design. The first playback machines still had a wind-up crank, but by 1926 these were replaced by an electric motor that replaced the wind-up crank to make the turntable spin. There was also no ugly-looking or –sounding horn for playback. Everything was neat, compacted and easier to play. The new electric motors made maintaining a constant, proper speed easier, though since a few releases, even by the major labels, were still slightly under or over 78 rpm—that speed would not become the industry standard until 1935!—the new machines still had variable-speed controls for the turntable. Nevertheless, both Columbia's new electrical playback system and Victor's, which was called "Orthophonic" (one of many made-up names that Victor and its successor, RCA Victor, would inflict on the record-buying public over the next 40 years), quickly became the new standard. By late 1928 there were virtually no homes in America that still relied on acoustic phonographs any more. This was the final blow for Edison, who by that year had lost virtually all of his name singers and musicians to other companies. Edison finally capitulated and entered the electrical, lateral-cut disc market himself, but by doing so he no longer had any leverage to force his consumers to purchase Edison playback equipment. Shortly after he made a remarkable series of recordings by Victor mainstay Giovanni Martinelli in 1929, he quietly folded his record division and turned his waning energy and resources to other matters. The inventor of the phonograph, partly due to stiff competition and partly due to his own recalcitrance and lack of star-quality names on his roster of artists, had become himself obsolete.

Complete operas good, bad and indifferent

There were also, for the first time, a fairly generous outpouring of complete operas, primarily by Italians, with integral casts. These included Verdi's *Aida*, *Rigoletto* (two versions, one on HMV-Victor, the other on Columbia), *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, *La Bohème*, *Madama Butterfly* and *Pagliacci*. Like their handful of predecessors, these recordings generally centered around one star singer, with the remainder of the cast being also-rans, though the *Aida* and *Barbiere* boasted all-star casts. The *Barbiere*, featuring tenor Dino Borgioli and the celebrated baritone Riccardo Stracciari, was something of a farewell to the old bel canto style while displaying a more steady tempo and more integrated ensemble style that was becoming the norm, but the HMV *Aida*, while also boasting stars from Toscanini's La Scala Opera—soprano Dusolina Giannini, mezzo Irene Mingheni-Cattaneo and tenor Aureliano Pertile—was decidedly un-Toscanini-like in the tearing apart of the vocal line to show "passion." This was the dominant style in Italy at that time, the "verismo, which used a splattery, gusty approach in virtually every style of opera. Toscanini himself railed against it but, when the maestro was away, the singers pulled out all their stops and let loose with excess emotion. Oddly enough, this style has found sympathetic listeners today, at a time when operas are sung more continentally but often far less passionately.

The French produced two complete operas of note, *Carmen* and *Faust*. Both of these, too, contained singers strongly influenced by the Italian verismatic approach: too-big voices somewhat overpowering the music. But the *Faust* also had one of the greatest singers of all time, basso Marcel Journet, in one of his calling-card roles. For the last time on records, a

singer was captured who could give Mephistopheles the full range of emotions—his menace, insinuation, charm and cynicism—as well as being able to negotiate the many trills and runs that the role called for. It was a tour-de-force by any standard, and remains so today.

There were, however, no really complete recordings of Russian or German opera. The former was considered too esoteric for general consumption; even *Boris Godunov* with the great Chaliapin in the title role was only recorded in part by HMV, a rare early example of a “live” performance at London’s Covent Garden. The Germans made albums of extended highlights from *Der Rosenkavalier* with Richard Mayr, Strauss’ first Baron Ochs, and soprano Lotte Lehmann, then the reigning Marschallin of her day, and a nearly-but-not-really complete *Tannhäuser*. This latter recording was, like the La Scala *Aida*, an all-star affair, featuring the actual singers of the 1930 Bayreuth production: sopranos Erna Berger and Maria Müller, tenor Sigismund Pilinszky and bass Ivar Andresen. It was conducted, at least ostensibly, by Karl Elmendorff; but to all those in the know, it has become the “Toscanini *Tannhäuser*.”

It was often said that Bronislaw Huberman hated making records more than any other artist but, really, until the late 1930s, it was Toscanini who was the most elusive of all the great artists of the era. Highly suspicious of the recording medium of his time with its annoying stop-start method, cutting complete symphonies and operas into four-minute chunks, Toscanini found it antithetical to an artistic performance. Thus he steadfastly refused to make many records, even with his beloved New York Philharmonic and La Scala Orchestras. But his supremely powerful artistic personality, combined with his extensive rehearsal methods, imposed a certain performance style on the artists who played and sang with him in opera productions. During the acoustic era, for instance, artists who sang under him—Frances Alda, Johanna Gadski, Frieda Hempel, Louise Homer, Caruso, Martinelli, Slezak and Antonio Scotti—made stylistically accurate and dramatically hair-raising recordings of excerpts from the operas they had recently performed with him. Among these were the Gadski-Homer duet from *Aida*, the Hempel-Caruso ensembles from *Ballo in Maschera* (Caruso, like Pertile, was often recalcitrant in the recording studio), Martinelli’s first-act aria from *Ernani*, and a wonderful short series from *Otello* by Alda, Slezak and Scotti.

In the electrical era, there were but two of those complete recordings that showed his influence strongly: the 1930 *Tannhäuser* (he conducted it at Bayreuth at the invitation of the composer’s son, Siegfried, who died that year) and the 1928 La Scala *Butterfly* with one of his favorite sopranos, Rosetta Pampanini. Both have an almost kinetic electricity to them, especially the *Butterfly*: listen to the music with Goro leading up to the entrance of Butterfly, its tension palpable. But without the maestro’s name on the record labels, collectors have dismissed their veracity. Musicians know differently and, in fact, this *Butterfly* and *Tannhäuser* provided the models, years later, for the extraordinarily similar recordings of those operas by Gianandrea Gavazzeni (*Butterfly*) and Georg Solti (*Tannhäuser*).

There was yet another set, almost complete but abridged, that came out during this era that is now virtually forgotten. This was the first-ever recording of a zarzuela, Arrieta’s *Marina*. Like most zarzuela, the music is eclectic and closer related to popular and folk music than its classical cousins, but it was an important cultural achievement. Perhaps one reason the recording has been overlooked is that the orchestra and especially the chorus are quite dismal, but the singers were among the very finest of their time and exemplars of the genre: soprano Mercedes Capsir, tenor Hipolito Lazaro (yet another tenor who aroused the jealousy of Caruso), baritone Marcos Redondo and the great basso José Mardones, whose sumptuous voice was exceptionally under-recorded in his day. As far as I know, these are the only electrical recordings by either Lazaro or Mardones.

Furtwängler vs. Toscanini: A war of records begins

In 1921, Artur Nikisch died suddenly in Berlin. A year later, Wilhelm Furtwängler was named his successor as music director of the Berlin Philharmonic. Furtwängler, the son of a famed archaeologist, was an extremely well educated man with a broad range of intellectual interests, including philosophy; and he brought this philosophical approach to music, much as Wagner and his favorite conductor, Hans von Bülow, had done in an earlier era. This meant that, to Furtwängler, music was a psychological journey and not a road to be traveled in one tempo or direction. He imbued his symphonic performances with rubato, ritards and accelerandi that were anathema to the more modern school of conducting, derived from Hector Berlioz and Hans Richter, which had found its adherents in such famous figures as Karl Muck, Alfred Hertz, Felix Weingartner, Richard Strauss and Fritz Busch. This was the stream of conducting that was making the most headway, not only in live performances but also on records. Sir George Henschel, a legendary baritone and conductor who had been a friend of Brahms, recorded a Richter-like, straightforward performance of the Beethoven First Symphony during the composer's "centennial year" of 1927, and in that year Weingartner embarked on his own recording of the complete nine symphonies (a project which he completed in 1937, and which was an enormous influence on Toscanini's own developing approach to the symphonies). But Furtwängler, for all his musical-psychological quirks, was without question one of the great conductors of the century. His performances were imbued with warmth and shot through with dramatic excitement; his weighty, spread tone had a richness and sheen that set the Berlin orchestra apart from all others for decades; and in certain music, most notably Wagner, Bruckner and (believe it or not) Rossini, he gave performances that were not only the equal but the superior of Toscanini.

Yet his appearances with the New York Philharmonic-Symphony, in the years when Toscanini and Willem Mengelberg were co-directors, garnered mixed reviews: ecstatic when he stuck to the score, highly critical when he meandered through his philosophical garden of sound. Oddly enough, Toscanini always liked Furtwängler: though he would not accept the psychological approach, he frankly admitted that when Furtwängler was good, he was great. Toscanini recommended that Furtwängler be re-engaged as principal guest conductor when his two-year contract was up, but neither Mengelberg (who was highly jealous of both conductors) nor the Philharmonic board liked him, so he was not brought back. This attitude of the board also came into play when Toscanini recommended Furtwängler as his successor in 1936. Because Toscanini insisted on it, they did make an offer, but when Furtwängler refused on the grounds that he needed to protect his musicians in Berlin, they did not press the issue.

Despite the realities of the Toscanini-Furtwängler relationship—the two conductors were even photographed together a few times—Furtwängler, who was extraordinarily paranoid, came to believe that Toscanini was truly his "rival." He began to publicly and privately condemn the Italian's performances as "mechanical" and "lacking feeling," which led certain German and British critics to create a more public rivalry in print (particularly by Theodor Adorno, who detested Toscanini's music-making and called Furtwängler "the opposite of a gramophone record") that has extended far beyond the grave. We will discuss this in greater detail later, but in a way it had its roots in this era and was fired, tentatively at first but more aggressively as the years went on, through their "war of records."

Soloists and chamber groups emerge

In many ways, the most artistic recordings made during the early electrical era were not

those by orchestras or singers, though some of them were decidedly important, but by instrumental soloists and chamber groups. One reason among many why electricals were so good for music may be seen in the reproduction of piano-playing. Gerald Moore, one of the century's great accompanists, once described how acoustic piano records were made. Much like the harsh-sounding Stroh violins, pianos of the period had their lids entirely removed, which gave the instrument an unnatural sound. With the advent of the carbon mic, this was no longer necessary. As a result, instrumentalists and chamber groups could record on their instruments of choice in a fairly natural sound-space.

In 1926, Fritz Kreisler made electrical recordings that were to have a wide-ranging impact. These included the Beethoven Violin Concerto, which included his own cadenzas: over the years, they influenced an enormous number of violinists, becoming preferred over cadenzas written by Joachim, Huberman and Milstein. But that year, Kreisler also made his first sonata recordings: the Grieg in c minor, the Schubert Sonata in A, and the Beethoven No. 8, recorded variously in Berlin, New York and Camden. These created a tremendous stir among listeners because his partner on these discs was none other than pianist-composer Sergei Rachmaninoff. Their "star" collaboration marks the first time that two such musicians who were not regular recital partners made recordings of the chamber repertoire.

Yet without question, the most important and influential chamber group of the time was a trio consisting of three of the world's greatest musicians: French violinist Jacques Thibaud, French pianist Alfred Cortot, and Spanish cellist Pablo Casals. On paper, they seemed like odd bedfellows: one would think that Casals' rich, powerful cello tone would have swamped Thibaud's light, delicate violin, or that Cortot, who was essentially a soloist, would not blend very well with both. But in practice, the trio was a miracle of musical and sonic balance. Somehow or other, these three men complemented each other in a way that has not been equaled since. Between 1926 and 1928 they made several outstanding recordings that were musical miracles: Schumann's Trio No. 1, Schubert's Trio No. 1, and perhaps best of all, Beethoven's celebrated "Archduke" trio. Their sensitive shadings and interlinear explorations of the music created a standard that, but for the phonograph, would have been very ephemeral indeed, for by the end of the decade the three players went their separate ways forever.

Another chamber group that had a much longer life, and so a greater long-range impact on listeners, was the Budapest String Quartet. They made their first records in 1926, at a time when all four of the musicians were indeed Hungarian; but by 1932 the "Russian invasion" of the quartet had begun, and by the end of the decade it consisted entirely of Russian musicians, primary among them the Schneider brothers, Alexander (first violin) and Mischa (cello), and violist Boris Kroyt. They were as famous for not getting along offstage as they were for their incredibly congruous performances onstage, but even from their early, all-Hungarian beginnings they presented an entirely new and modern approach to quartet playing. Gone were the rubato and portamento of yesteryear; in its place was a straightforward approach, imbued with an inner fire, that captivated all who heard it and made them both early and lasting legends.

During this time, too, violinist Bronislaw Huberman broke his quarter-century-long silence on records. Extremely heartened by a concert tour of the U.S., the highlight of which for him was a free Sunday afternoon concert for the largely African-American workers of the Ford assembly plant in Detroit, he made an extraordinary series of recordings for Brunswick in 1926 that put his name back on the international map. Most of these recordings were of short "encore" pieces, but among them was a prize: a complete performance of Beethoven's "Kreutzer" sonata, with pianist Siegfried Schulte, which because of Huberman's phenomenal international reputation, influenced musicians for four years—until he re-made it electrically, in a stunning, idiosyncratic performance with pianist Ignaz Friedman.

The following year, another child prodigy, one who, like Huberman, had completely avoided conservatory schooling, made his debut on records. This was twelve-year-old Yehudi Menuhin, the prize pupil of Georges Enesco. His first records, too, were of the encore variety, and as such are largely forgotten today, but in the early 1930s he would embark on his true legacy in a way that was to greatly impact the future of violin-playing and provide an alternative to the intensely powerful projections of Heifetz.

At the same time, newer pianists were making electrics that would again have a long-range influence. Primary among them was Cortot, whose rich, luscious, deep-in-the-keys playing was complemented by a true poetic approach to all the music he performed. Technically, Cortot was suspect: he didn't practice much, believing that too much practice killed spontaneity of performance. But this, in a way, is what makes his records seem so "alive." By approaching each of them as if it were an actual performance, and not just a commercial product to be sold, his mercurial temperament was perfectly captured even as his fingering became ever more suspect through the years.

Another was Walter Gieseking. Though perhaps less inner-connected to some of the music he performed than Cortot, he presented listeners with a "new" kind of German pianist, one not much concerned with the rhetorical pauses and questionable over-accenting of Josef Hoffman, Vladimir de Pachmann or Josef Lhevinne. As the 1920s moved into the '30s, their reputations began to wane, but his grew by leaps and bounds. Moreover, he was a true rarity, a German pianist who not only excelled in Beethoven and Schumann but also in the music of Debussy. As time went on, in fact, his Beethoven playing, superb as it was in many ways, was eclipsed by that of Artur Schnabel and Egon Petri, but his Debussy was eclipsed by none and equaled by few, even among French pianists.

In 1926, using film with synchronized 33 1/3 rpm discs, Vitaphone introduced its film shorts. As with early recordings, the focus was on singers: Marion Talley, Frances Alda, Rosa Raisa, Ernestine Schumann-Heink, Giovanni Martinelli, Tito Schipa and Giuseppe de Luca were among the many who made these short films. Martinelli was a particular favorite because he was, unlike the others, an interesting stage actor in addition to being a brilliant singer. But there were instrumental shorts, too, among them violinist Mischa Elman and even the New York Philharmonic-Symphony (performing the "Tannhäuser" overture). One of the most unusual, distinguished and arresting of these, however, was a performance of the second movement of Beethoven's "Kreutzer" sonata by violinist Efrem Zimbalist and pianist Harold Bauer. It was unusual for a number of reasons, not the least of which was that neither Zimbalist nor Bauer were terribly interesting for non-musicians to watch. Another reason was that the Andante of this sonata is not really "marketable" music, being quiet and not flashy. And yet it exists, one of the rare appearances by Zimbalist captured for posterity, and an eloquent testimony to his skills as an interpreter.

By such means, both the gramophone and sound films were growing up, reaching a point where complete performances by celebrated artists could be captured in such a way that they enriched the lives of the present as well as providing instruction and interest to the listeners and viewers of tomorrow.

Jazz: the Musical Revolution Heard 'Round the World

But when the day is over and the sun sinks in the west,
Say, I'm the only little bird who doesn't go to nest!
'Cause I'm a jazz vampire;
Take a tip, take a tip, take a tip from me,

For I am all the *evil* that is jazz...

(Lyrics from "I'm a Jazz Vampire," as sung by Marion Harris in 1920)

All the while that these legal and technological revolutions were going on, a musical revolution had taken America by storm before the end of World War I and continued to do so long after the War ended. That revolution was jazz, often cited as America's most important musical art-form, and the only one besides films that has impacted world culture.

Of course, folk music in its various forms and guises had been part of the recording industry even from its infancy, primarily ethnic folk music. The principal ethnicities targeted were the largest, the Irish, Italian and Jewish immigrants; but other ethnicities were also marketed, among them Swedish, Scottish, Norwegian and even Arabic immigrants. (Early folk recordings from 1921 by the Björling Male Quartet on American Columbia, for instance, mark the first recordings of a boy soprano who would soon become one of the world's greatest tenors, Jussi Björling.) Yet the most popular of these remained the three ethnicities originally named, because they simply had the largest representative populations.

During the late 1890s, the ethnic melting-pot that was old New Orleans started to produce a new and exciting kind of music. Blended together from African-American spirituals and field songs, Italian tarantellas, Yiddish klezmer music, European symphonic and opera music and the then-high-popular ragtime, it virtually exploded over all quarters of the Crescent City as entertainment music for dances, weddings, funerals, Mardi Gras, and even the expensive and well-kept brothels of "Storyville," a portion of the city set aside by councilman Sidney Story as a separate red-light district. Part of the reason why this music was so eclectic was that all of these ethnicities co-existed peacefully in New Orleans, unlike other Southern cities where racial tensions continued to run high well into the 1960s. In fact, in addition to those already named, there was a modest influx of people and music from the Spanish-settled countries of Mexico and Cuba, which gave the music a flavor that pianist-composer Jelly Roll Morton called "the Spanish tinge."

The earliest form of the music combined the instrumentation of a concert or ragtime band with the polyphony of a chamber group. The cornet or trumpet usually played lead, though a really powerful clarinet or soprano saxophone could also alternate in that role. The clarinet played weaving countermelodies to the cornet, while the trombone acted as a sort of *cantus firmus*, providing counterpoint as a moving bass line. The rhythm instruments, which consisted of a banjo, bass and drums, both filled in between the cracks in the music and drove the beat. When playing in street funerals or parades, the bass was replaced by the more portable tuba. Though they used existing or new tunes, the basic premise of the music was improvisation, to create new melodies and counterpoint based on the existing chord pattern. This was "original" New Orleans jass and, though it came in part from "classical" music, it had—to be honest—no "class" about it at all.

Among the first bands to play the new music—soon termed "jass" after a slang term in the Crescent City for sexual intercourse—were those led by African-American cornetist Buddy Bolden and white pianist Jack "Papa" Laine. Laine would not record until 1950, when he was a very old man, and Bolden would not record at all. He went insane during a street parade in 1907, was sentenced to life in an asylum, and died there, mad, in 1931.

Bolden's successor in the Eagle Band was trombonist Frankie Dusen, but since trombones were not then a lead instrument he soon turned over leadership duties to Bolden's second trumpet, Willie "Bunk" Johnson. Again, Dusen would not make any recordings at all, and Johnson would not record until 1942; but unlike the Papa Laine recordings, Bunk Johnson's are considered some of the finest of all traditional jazz. More of that much later.

From about 1910 onward, many of the original “jass” musicians traveled outward to other states, primarily to Texas, Missouri, Colorado and California. There they played their music, sowed the seeds for future fans, and generally returned home. But the big record companies weren’t interested in recording their music; it was considered too “regional” to sell enough copies to recoup their outlay. Plus, there was another problem. Since jass was a music of improvisation, and jass musicians made their living based on how original they were, they didn’t like the idea of putting their ideas in a permanent form that others could copy. It is rumored that when cornetist Freddie Keppard, a huge man with a powerful tone who was considered the successor to Buddy Bolden, was asked to record in 1916, he refused on the grounds that others would “steal my stuff.”

Based on the existing recordings by such pioneers as Keppard, Joe “King” Oliver, Jelly Roll Morton, Sidney Bechet, Bunk Johnson and the New Orleans Rhythm Kings, the authentic “jass” music had a loose, funky beat, difficult for those who did not grow up in the tradition to steal. But in 1916, a quintet of five white New Orleans musicians who called themselves “The Original Dixieland Jass Band,” an offshoot of Papa Laine’s orchestra, headed north to New York City where they soon landed a job at Reisenweber’s Café on Columbus Circle. The jass they played was not loose, funky, bluesy or relaxed, but tight, sharply-contoured and driving—in short, a perfect match for a restless populace tired of the war and looking for a new novelty. Among those who traveled to Reisenweber’s to hear the band were a young popular pianist and arranger named Ferde Grofé, an aspiring bandleader named Paul Whiteman, and even Enrico Caruso himself.

The sensation created by the band led to their being offered a recording contract by Columbia, where they made their first discs in January 1917. But Columbia’s engineers could not handle the powerful, raucous cacophony of sound that the band produced, so they did not sign them to a long-term contract and shelved the discs. In February, possibly at the request of Caruso, they were approached by staid Calvin Childs of Victor. They made their first records for Victor on 26 February 1917, “Livery Stable Blues” and “Dixie Jass Band One-Step,” the latter of which was a medley with “That Teasin’ Rag.”

When Calvin Childs first heard the band, with LaRocca’s searing cornet lead, Larry Shields’ pungent clarinet and Tony Sbarbaro’s bass drum whacks, he almost had a coronary. Their volume and energy made the cutting stylus jump out of the groove. But Childs would not give up: he put his best engineer on the job and, by the end of what I am sure was a very long day, the two sides were made, sonically balanced and ready for release. When that first record (Victor 18255) was released shortly thereafter, it created a sensation. “Jass” was on



the map. And, as record followed record, preserving such early classics as “Tiger Rag,” “Bluin’ the Blues,” “Fidgety Feet,” “Sensation Rag,” “Clarinet Marmalade,” “At the Jazz Band Ball” (by 1918, because of negative press, Victor changed the spelling to “jazz”) and “Ostrich Walk,” the Original Dixieland JAZZ Band, or ODJB for short, became a legend. By the fall of 1918, timid Columbia was even prompted to issue its ODJB record, but by then the band was identified in the public mind with Victor.

In the summer of 1919, the ODJB traveled to England, where they created yet another sensation. While there, they made several recordings for British Columbia—twelve-inch discs rather than Victor’s ten-inch sides—that allowed them to play longer and with more variation. Among them were “Satanic Blues,” “Lasses Candy,” “I’ve Got My Captain Working for Me Now” and “I’ve Lost My Heart in Dixieland.” And in that same year, an African-American band went to Paris where they played in the French theaters to rave reviews. In fact it was at one of these concerts that the band was heard and reviewed by the esteemed classical conductor Ernest Ansermet, who raved about a “young black boy” on clarinet who played “the most original ‘blues’ I have ever heard.” The “young black boy” was none other than Sidney Bechet, then only twenty-two years old.

Thus we see how, even from the very start, jazz of almost any style was voraciously consumed by audiences overseas as much as in its home country. But neither the audiences here or there could really tell the difference between real jazz and the more commercialized dance music that grew up around it, borrowed its rhythms and heat, but could not produce its subtle thrills. This has been a problem, especially for American jazz lovers, all throughout its history. The true cognoscenti have always had a difficult time trying to explain to less sensitive listeners how the quality of an improvisation is not just based on what sounds “fast and funny,” that one must listen for the creativity and sensitivity of the player; that not all jazz or jazz musicians are created equal, and to find the true geniuses among the many contenders takes patient ear training, the same as for any real art music.

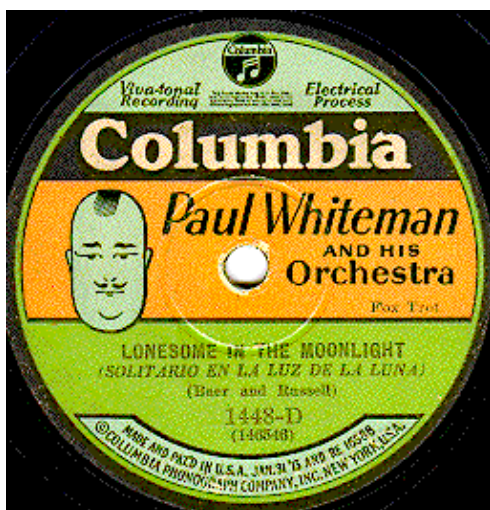
In 1920, during the time when Victor and Columbia were valiantly fighting tiny little Gennett in hand-to-hand legal combat, other labels—emboldened by Gennett’s early successes in court—sprang up out of nowhere and began making popular lateral-cut discs. Some, like Domino, Banner, Black Patti, Van Dyke (“Every record a masterpiece”—no kidding!) and Black Swan, were short-lived, while others, such as Okeh, Brunswick, Vocalion and Paramount, became major players in the jazz and blues fields. Blues singer Mamie Smith made the first blues record, “Crazy Blues,” for Okeh in 1920; that same year, pianist James P. Johnson, the “father of stride,” made his first recordings for Columbia.



But if Columbia lost out on the burgeoning jazz market—they would not become a major player in the field until the late 1920s—they struck a gold mine in the other form of African-American musical art, the blues. First with Mamie Smith in 1921, then with Bessie Smith (no relation) in 1923, they found a particularly rich lode that could be mined and marketed, especially to Southern black workers transplanted to the North. Northern blacks never really took to the Southern blues, with its long, languorous melodies and slow beat; they wanted something fast and jazzy, even in their blues. One commentator described her performance at

a theater in Newark, New Jersey in 1927 as being so slow that one could go to the rest room, take a smoke break and come back; Bessie would still be in the middle of a chorus.

Yet Bessie became a phenomenon, even in her own time, but especially after her death. First named “Queen of the Blues” and then “Empress,” she had the rare ability to hypnotize an audience, hold them in the palm of her hand, only releasing them when she felt ready to do so. Even on records, her power can be felt. Ironically, the writers who not only promoted her but elevated her to the level of great artist were primarily white: Roger Pryor Dodge and Carl van Vechten, the latter a noted author, photographer and classical music critic who compared the power of her performances to that of Lilli Lehmann singing Donna Anna at the Salzburg Festival. They, and the generations who came after them, heard in her performances “this elemental conjure woman with her plangent African voice, quivering with passion and pain, sounding as if it had been developed at the source of the Nile (van Vechten, 1947).” But as



the decades rolled on and Bessie Smith passed from living artist to deceased legend, African-Americans, for the most part, passed her by in favor of more modern icons. It is, perhaps, in the nature of our media culture that the new and current always replace the old and antiquated, and to many black listeners, Bessie’s rich, brass-tinged voice—generally confined to two octaves despite her power and eloquence—means nothing at all to them now.

Columbia later claimed that, after they had filed for receivership and were basically working out of bankruptcy, Bessie Smith made them solvent again. Their reward to her was to keep her on the label through 1930, though the fad for Southern blues had truly died out in the North by 1926. But they also

made money, perhaps not as much, from Clara Smith, Trixie Smith and Ida Cox; and when they finally entered the jazz market, they did so with such stellar names as Red Nichols and Duke Ellington, though their biggest money-maker of the era was Paul Whiteman, who they stole away from Victor in the spring of 1928—revenge, perhaps, for the loss of the ODJB a decade earlier.

Also in 1920 the popular white dance bands of Art Hickman and Paul Whiteman, using some of the forms and rhythms of jazz, made their debuts on Columbia and Victor respectively. The “softer,” more polite sounds made by these white bands, with alto saxophones (not then considered a true jazz instrument) often playing the lead, created a market for music that was jazz-based but not really jazz. By the time French composer Darius Milhaud came to New York and heard “jazz” in 1921, what he was hearing was the white commercial version of the music. He scoured record shops in New York, hoping to find authentic black jazz that he could use to inspire a new composition, which he promptly wrote and titled “La Creation du Monde.” But the records he bought, though they appeared on such labels as Black Swan, were not by black jazz musicians at all, even if the labels said so. In fact the principal record on which he based his piece, “Aunt Hagar’s Children’s Blues” by “Ladd’s Black Aces,” was actually a white band led by contractor Sam Lanin: the band’s pianist was none other than future comedian Jimmy Durante!

Meanwhile, back to Gennett...

Emboldened and financially enriched by their legal victory over Victor, Gennett opened a second recording studio—really a wooden shack by the side of the railroad tracks—in Richmond, Indiana in 1921. Neither heated nor air-conditioned, the shack sweltered in the summer and froze in the winter, but it was here, in a room probably better equipped for smoking meat than creating musical history, that Gennett decided to tap into Midwestern talent overlooked by larger companies, often charging aspiring but unproven performers for studio time against any profits from future record sales. Among the groups that Gennett charged for their “valuable” studio time was The Syncopated Five and Their Orchestra, a now-obscure group that contained the excellent saxist Ray Stilwell and legendary cornetist Red Nichols, in November 1922. But by then they had already started recording other jazz musicians, most of whom had migrated from New Orleans to Chicago.



The first of these, chronologically, was the New Orleans Rhythm Kings (NORK), whose first records were made in the dead of summer, August 1922. Like the ODJB, the NORK was an all-white band (though lead cornetist Paul Mares was Creole) but, unlike the ODJB which stressed ensemble playing over solos, the NORK excelled in both. Every single member of its front line—cornetist Mares, clarinetist Leon Roppolo and saxist Jack Pettis—were more than capable soloists, and in fact Roppolo—who often played full-chorus solos with only rhythm accompaniment—is now considered the first jazz musician to improvise on the chords of a song rather than solely on its melody. (Pettis would later have his own group, Jack Pettis and his Pets, as well as briefly grace the dance band of New Yorker Ben Bernie. A

film short from 1925 of the Bernie band with Pettis, who plays a full-chorus solo in “Sweet Georgia Brown,” is probably the first video of a jazz musician in performance.) Also unlike the ODJB, which pursued a stiff, driving beat, the NORK played what could be termed a “rolling” beat. This type of beat, indigenous to certain New Orleans bands and musicians, was later exemplified by such groups as Sidney Bechet’s New Orleans Feetwarmers and would have an enormous impact on the emerging swing style. Like the ODJB, the NORK recorded pieces that would become instant jazz classics: “Eccentric,” “Bugle Call Rag,” “Farewell Blues,” “Panama,” “Oriental,” “That’s A-Plenty,” “Shimmeshawabble,” “Weary Blues,” “That Da-Da Strain” and “Tin Roof Blues.”

In many ways, largely due to the low-key personalities of its members, the NORK was an underrated band, whereas the second famous band to record for Gennett, King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band, was in some ways overrated. Oliver was famous in New Orleans for his bluesy, gutbucket style; he usually played with mutes, including one that resembled a doorknob, and had a limited range and technique; but his slow, bluesy style created a sensation at the Royal Gardens on Chicago’s south side. He, too, had excellent sidemen, including clarinetist Johnny Dodds and his younger brother, drummer Warren “Baby” Dodds; but when he sent a telegram to young



Louis Armstrong, then playing in the riverboat band of Fate Marable, to come north and join him, the band graduated from novelty to sensation.

No one had ever heard anything like Armstrong. His tone was so powerful that even in those days, he had to turn his back to the recording horn, much like contralto Louise Homer. Oliver and Armstrong developed a trick of playing improvised choruses together in thirds. Since Oliver covered his playing hand with a handkerchief, listeners couldn't understand how Armstrong knew what he was going to play. (Years later, Armstrong revealed that while Johnny Dodds or trombonist Honore Dutrey was taking his solo, Oliver would finger his valves silently so Armstrong could "see" what he was going to play.) But as great as the band was in person, their records are for the most part restrictive in solo space and somewhat stiff-sounding. Jazz critic and author Ralph Berton, who heard both bands in person as a young teenager, told the author that the reason for this is that Oliver was intimidated by the Gennett staff when making records while the all-white NORK was not. Still, several of the Creole Band's discs became classics: "Dippermouth Blues," later renamed "Sugar Foot Stomp," contains a full-chorus solo by Oliver that has been copied note-for-note from the day the record was issued in 1923, while "Chimes Blues" contains Armstrong's first recorded solo—actually playing counterpoint to the melody, not an improvisation—and "Alligator Hop" shows the band at or near their best.

Also in 1923, Gennett recorded piano solos by the man who is universally recognized as jazz's first great composer, Ferdinand "Jelly Roll" Morton. Morton's playing was markedly different from both the stiff, clunking style prevalent at the time as well as the "stride" style, derived from ragtime, developed by James P. Johnson. Firstly, Morton emulated the sound of a full band in his playing, alternating full-band choruses with "solos" that would be played by other instruments. Morton was later to exemplify his musical theories in a remarkable series of band records which he made for Victor. Secondly, in his playing both hands were equal partners in the improvisation, whereas in stride the left hand basically provided the "rhythm section" for right-hand excursions. And thirdly, Morton's playing had overtones of both African drumming and what he called the "Spanish tinge," which shows up in "New Orleans Joys," "Tia Juana" and "The Crave." Yet the pieces that had the greatest impact on future jazz were his "stomps," "Kansas City" and "King Porter." The latter became virtually the unofficial theme song of the swing era, though the composer didn't earn a dime from any of the various recordings of it.



Gennett also recorded a studio-only band called the Red Onion Jazz Babies that included Armstrong and soprano saxist-clarinetist Sidney Bechet. Bechet is widely acknowledged as the only African-American jazz musician of that era to be Armstrong's equal, but he did not achieve anywhere near Armstrong's fame. Part of this was due to his early wanderlust: after playing in France from the late 'teens to the early '20s, he returned to America where he recorded these sides with Armstrong, then briefly joined the brand-new band led by a Washington, D.C. stride pianist named Edward "Duke" Ellington. But then he left again, this time for Russia, of all places, where he stayed until the early 1930s. By the time he returned the Depres-

sion was in full force, no one wanted to buy records of hot Dixieland jazz, and so Bechet was relegated to playing small clubs until the New Orleans revival of the 1940s finally made him a major name.

In 1924, yet another legendary musician made records for the label. This was Bix Beiderbecke, a 21-year-old cornetist from Iowa, whose unconventional phrasing and advanced harmonic sense led him to even eclipse Roppolo as a major influence on white jazz musicians. At that time, Beiderbecke was playing in a rather mediocre band called The Wolverines. Vic Berton, one of the greatest of the early jazz drummers, was so taken with his playing that he became the band's manager and part-time drummer; but he lost out because he managed the band and not the genius. When Beiderbecke left the Wolverines in the fall of 1924 to join Jean Goldkette's dance band in Detroit, Berton was left managing a very mediocre band of enthusiastic but conventional white jazz musicians.

Gennett had a few more chances at musical history, being the first label to record pianist-singer Hoagy Carmichael and Duke Ellington's orchestra. But their lack of strong media representation, combined with their penurious practices, led them to lose all their jazz stars. Bix was the first to leave, but in late 1924 Gennett also lost King Oliver's band to Paramount, an excruciatingly bad label (their records were pressed on reconstituted shellac bonded to a core of pressed sawdust), in 1925 the NORK went to Victor for a brief time before disbanding, Ellington went to Brunswick-Vocalion (as did, eventually, King Oliver), Morton also went to Paramount and eventually Victor, and the Wolverines fell apart after a few months on the road with their new cornetist, Jimmy MacPartland. After 1925, Gennett was no longer a major player in the jazz field, even though their early discs—despite their technical limitations—made a history that has lived on ever since.



New labels, new opportunities, and the incredible Sam Lanin

As already mentioned, the new labels that arose or expanded their catalogs to include jazz gave the record-buying public a vast cornucopia of sounds. Among the most durable and important were Okeh, Paramount and Vocalion-Brunswick in addition to the by-now-notorious Gennett.

In 1916, almost as an afterthought, the Brunswick-Balke-Collender company, manufacturers of pianos and sporting equipment—they're probably best-known for their Brunswick bowling balls—entered the recording field almost as an afterthought. Like Emerson and Gennett, their early catalog was undistinguished and uninteresting; but with the coming of the "Jazz Age," they expanded their horizons and began producing new lateral-cut discs that became immediately popular. As a counterpart to Art Hickman and Paul Whiteman, Brunswick signed the very popular Isham Jones band out of Iowa, which had a surprise hit in 1924 with a new tune written by stride pianist James P. Johnson, "The Charleston." That same year, Brunswick also signed a novelty band from Missouri that played what was known in the South as "spasm music" on kazoos, washboards and banjos. This was the Mound City Blue Blowers, who scored a major hit with "San." But the Blue Blowers were not just a novelty pop group, though their members were white. These were dedicated jazz musicians who just

happened to play “illegitimate” instruments, and their leader, a former St. Louis jockey named Red McKenzie, went on to achieve a certain small fame when he replaced Bing Crosby as the male singer in Paul Whiteman’s band in 1930.

But this is getting ahead of ourselves. The money that Brunswick was raking in from Isham Jones, the Mound City Blue Blowers and others allowed them to acquire Vocalion Records late in 1924. Vocalion was an altogether tonier label that recorded classical artists such as tenors Alfred Piccaver and Armand Tokatyan and soprano Rosa Raisa, the star of the Chicago Opera and the only real rival to Victor’s Rosa Ponselle; in fact it was a 1923 Vocalion



record of the Schumann Piano Quartet that inspired Sir Compton MacKenzie to found Britain’s “Gramophone” magazine that year. By 1926, Brunswick transferred most of their classical artists, which by then included soprano Florence Easton, tenors Mario Chamlee and Giacomo Lauri-Volpi, pianist Walter Gieseking, violinists Toscha Seidel and Bronislaw Huberman and, for one disc only, Arturo Toscanini and the New York Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra, to their new Brunswick gold label, while Vocalion shared jazz artists like Duke Ellington and Jimmie Noone with the parent company.

In such a wide-open market, the need for quality recording groups quickly exceeded the supply, so some of the bands recorded under pseudonyms. This created yet another problem for record-buyers of the time as well as discographers of the future: how could one really tell if a record by Band X was “really” by that band, or by another recording under a pseudonym? Or was it really a working band at all, or just a studio group assembled for that purpose? Soon band “contractors” appeared on the scene, men who had good ties to quality musicians who could be assembled on tap at a moment’s notice. The king of this new domain was Sam



Lanin, a New York-based bandleader who saw a golden opportunity to make money, and lots of it, providing groups to make records. Between 1921 and 1930, Lanin either led his own bands or created studio-only ones for recording purposes: Ladd's Black Aces, Goldie's Syn-copators, The Cotton Pickers, The Arkansas Travelers, Meyer's Dance Orchestra, The Hottentots, The Broadway Bellhops, etc. etc. etc. Many of these groups consisted of dance musicians trying to play jazz, but some of them had such quality jazz artists on them as cornetists Red Nichols or Bix Beiderbecke, saxist Frank Trumbauer, the Dorsey brothers, bass saxist Adrian Rollini and drummers Vic Berton or Chauncey Morehouse. Thus a portion of Lanin's output remains valuable and interesting as music, while the majority have been relegated to the scrap-heap of oblivion.

Another label to become a major player in the jazz wars, perhaps one of the finest, was Okeh. Okeh was the brainchild of Otto Heineman, whose Phonograph Supply Company entered the record business, modestly, by acquiring the assets of the Rex Talking Machine Corp. of Philadelphia. In early 1918, Heineman began producing vertically-cut Okeh records, supposedly taking the name from an Indian word that, coincidentally, displayed his initials very nicely as originally designed. Heineman's strategy had been to buy existing, well-established companies to manufacture his products, and he remained true to form in creating his Okeh label, acquiring the former Rex-Imperial studio (and with it, veteran recording engineer Charles A. Hibbard and musical director Fred Hager). The first Okeh labels had an Indian head on them, but this disappeared by 1920, by which time he had already reorganized his company as the General Phonograph Corporation. Financed by and closely allied with the powerful Carl Lindström organization (which by that time was producing Beka, Da Capo, Favorite, Fonotipia, and Parlophone records in addition to Odeon), Heineman introduced a new line of standard lateral-cut Okeh discs with the now-familiar dark red/maroon color. This was the label that launched Mamie Smith's first blues record in November of that year; and, in 1925, something new and startling.



This was a series of records initiated by Richard M. Jones, a jazz pianist from New Orleans, who had become Okeh's A&R man. Jones contracted Louis Armstrong, who was becoming a sensation in Chicago playing with Erskine Tate's orchestra, to make an extended series of records with a studio band called the Hot Five. The musicians were all from New Orleans but playing with different bands in Chicago: clarinetist Johnny Dodds, trombonist Edward "Kid" Ory and banjoist Johnny St. Cyr. Louis played cornet (switching to trumpet near the end of 1926) and his wife, Lil Hardin, was the pianist. The arrangements were loose and geared more towards solo brilliance than ensemble polyphony; in fact, it is this series of records that sharpened the focus on the *soloist*. Little by little, session by session, Armstrong stretched his wings and took flight; by early 1927 his front-line partners, Dodds and Ory, were so intimidated by his playing that they began to either recede into the background or make serious mistakes in their own solos. They simply couldn't keep up with him.

More than a few jazz musicians and, later, jazz scholars have considered the Armstrong Hot Five records (and, for a two-week period in 1927, the Hot Seven when they were joined by tuba-player Pete Briggs and drummer Baby Dodds) to have been an aberration in jazz his-

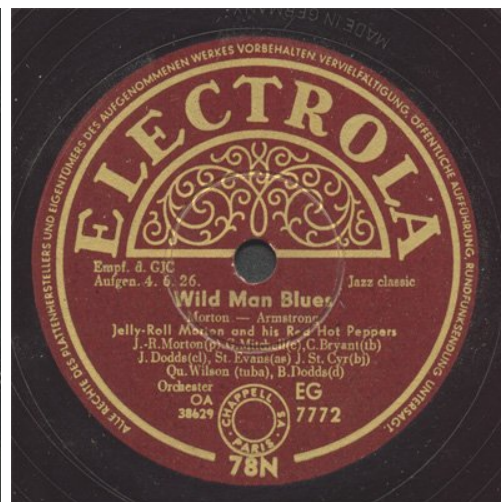
tory. They acknowledge that Armstrong was without question the most brilliant soloist on a single-note instrument of his day, but feel that the inspiration of other, less gifted musicians to follow in his footsteps broke apart the finely-tuned balance of ensemble playing. Of course, this is an oversimplification; as time went on there were not only others as good as Armstrong but, in some ways, better as solo players, and highly gifted arrangers found other ways of writing for an ensemble that did not include the New Orleans polyphony (or did, but expanded it in size). Yet the Armstrong Hot Five and Hot Seven recordings have survived and inspired no less than three generations of jazz musicians, from Ernest “Punch” Miller and Roland “Bunny” Berigan to such non-trumpeters as saxists Al Cohn and Sonny Rollins. In their day, the records were enormously popular: between black record-buyers who purchased them for



dancing and the many musicians who wanted to learn from them, they disappeared from dealers’ shelves faster than they could be stocked. And thanks to OKeh’s ties to the General Phonograph Company, they appeared overseas on the Odeon label.

About a year after the Hot Five sessions began, Victor also opened a recording studio in Chicago. Wanting to capture some of the black market, they initiated a series of recordings, also by a studio-only band, that also had a large impact on the future of jazz. This was the Red Hot Peppers, a group led by pianist-composer Jelly Roll Morton. In Chicago, the Red Hot Peppers used some of the same musicians as the Armstrong discs, but their focus was on composition and arrangement rather than soloistic virtuosity, a trend continued when Morton

moved to New York in 1928. Essentially an idealized band treatment of early New Orleans jazz, Morton’s band recordings created a whole new genre: music that could be danced to, but was even more



rewarding as a solely listening experience. Morton's rich and extremely clever arrangements used sound-color in a way that it had never been used before; to this day, certain passages in his records linger in the mind. Once heard, there seems no other way to play them that is as valid and interesting as his. In addition to his own compositions, Morton also arranged pieces by NORK pianist Mel Stitzel ("The Chant") and a hit then being performed by his friend King Oliver ("Doctor Jazz") which overwhelmed and superceded the originals.

Hot jazz was becoming big business in the "jazz age." In late 1925 Roger Wolfe Kahn, the sixteen-year-old son of wealthy banker Otto, convinced his father to bankroll a dance band for him to lead, just for fun. With his father's fortune behind him, Kahn hired the finest white musicians available in the New York area, among them trumpeter Tommy Gott, trombonist Miff Mole, violinist Joe Venuti, guitarist Eddie Lang, pianist Arthur Schutt and drummer Vic Berton. All of these musicians (excepting Gott) were highly-prized freelancers whose playing graced some of the finest white jazz records of the time, but for at least two years Kahn was the only one who had them night after night. Not all of his records are of equal interest or value, and Kahn himself realized this: he was playing for wealthy white dancers, not a hot jazz audience. Yet their arrangements were so beautifully constructed, with a fresh, open, airy sound and excellent spot solos, that his band became popular well beyond his expectations. Their "sound" was emulated by both the Chicago-based band of former NORK drummer Ben Pollack and the already-mega-star New York leader Paul Whiteman.

Two other early jazz orchestras that had an impact on the emerging jazz music were those of Jean Goldkette, a band contractor from Detroit who, unlike Lanin, actually put his bands on the road, and Fletcher Henderson, a college-educated African-American pianist who led one of the most star-studded of hot bands. But neither made records that were particularly memorable or interesting. The main Goldkette orchestra, which contained such stars as cornetist Bix Beiderbecke, trombonist Bill Rank, clarinetist Don Murray, saxist Frank Trumbauer and former NORK bassist Steve Brown, was handicapped by Victor's recording director, Eddie King. King believed that for Goldkette's band to compete in a crowded field, it had to play music soft and sweet. This led to their recording a great many dull stock arrangements in which only an occasional solo by Beiderbecke, Rank, Trumbauer or Brown (or session freelancers Venuti and Lang) provided any interest. The "real" Goldkette sound was only captured on two records which were supervised by the more musically astute Nathaniel Shilkret rather than Eddie King, "My Pretty Girl" and "Clementine (From New Orleans)." But the latter was the band's very last record: with so many stars in the orchestra, the band's payroll had exceeded income, and so by September 1927 Goldkette was forced to let them all go.

The Henderson band had an opposite problem. Prompted by their various labels to always play hot, they were forced to fill sides with tunes and arrangements not always worthy of them. In addition, Henderson never learned (as Morton and Ellington did) how to "pace" his orchestra to make a satisfying *recorded* performance. More often than not, the Henderson discs contain brilliant solos by an exceptionally talented core of musicians (including trumpeters Tommy Ladnier and Rex Stewart, clarinetist Buster Bailey, trombonist Jimmy Harrison and the great tenor saxist Coleman Hawkins) within a framework of shoddy ensemble playing and arrangements that sounded what they were, badly truncated for recording purposes. And Henderson, too, used stock arrangement, lots of them. The result has been a mishmash that collectors have been sifting through for nearly a century. Yet Henderson had a truly great arranger on his staff, Don Redman, whose pieces were so advanced in the emerging New York style that they even caught the ear of Paul Whiteman, who commissioned one of them ("Whiteman Stomp") to produce his greatest jazz recording. Among the Henderson band's most lasting achievements was its hot arrangement of a Morton tune that the composer never

made with an orchestra, “King Porter Stomp,” which later became a mainstay of the Swing Era; their band version of King Oliver’s “Dippermouth Blues,” now renamed “Sugar Foot Stomp” (recorded under the name of “Connie’s Inn Orchestra”); and in 1931, a full-band arrangement of a small-group recording by Bix Beiderbecke that had become an early jazz classic, “Singin’ the Blues.”

One of the most interesting, creative and prolific of all jazz musicians of this era, however, was cornetist Loring “Red” Nichols. An extraordinary virtuoso on his instrument, he was in constant demand for both live band performances and recording sessions; having played on several of Sam Lanin’s dates, he adopted his techniques of “record contracting” to produce hundreds of discs for a variety of labels large and small. Some of his band names were Lanin’s, some were his own: The Arkansas Travelers, The Cotton Pickers, The Hottentots, The Seven Missing Links, Louisiana Rhythm Kings, Meyer’s Dance Orchestra. But the name that Lanin gave to some of his early dates with him, The Red Heads, soon became the name by which he recorded many of his most famous discs: Red Nichols and his Five Pennies. The Pennies were only a recording-studio group until 1928, after which—to paraphrase trombonist Glenn Miller, who played on many of the sides—they had “four to six guys hiding behind the curtain.” But name stuck, the band became extraordinarily popular, and by the end of the Jazz Age Red Nichols was one of the era’s most famous and recognizable of its stars. One of his star sidemen on record dates, trombonist Miff Mole, was in fact the first great soloist on his instrument. Gifted with an impeccable technique, he could play difficult intervals cleanly and improvise in a vertical manner that became a heavy influence on the Bebop school of jazz that emerged after World War II. He, too, made many records under the name of Miff Mole and his Little Molars, though Odeon chose to issue some of them under the pseudonym of “Eddie Gorman’s Band.”



Yet without question, the single greatest jazz talent to emerge from the 1920s was that of Duke Ellington. An excellent stride pianist who learned his craft by studying James P. Johnson’s piano rolls, he moved from Washington, D.C. to New York in 1924, started his own dance band, and by 1927 had developed it into a unique organization. Combining elements of Southern jazz, New York sophistication and his own burgeoning talent as the most prolific of all jazz and pop composers, Ellington’s band fused the idiosyncrasies of his gifted but somewhat limited early sidemen into a *mélange* of sound. From the melting pot of “growl” trumpeter Bubber Miley, plunger-muted trombonist Joe “Tricky Sam” Nanton, pungent clarinetist Rudy Jackson, alto saxist Otto Hardwick and the great New Orleans slap-bassist Wellman Braud, Ellington created a style that he could only call a “jungle band.” Fortunately for him, the Harlem Renaissance—a cultural movement created by wealthy whites to promote what they considered true “African” art through the poetry, art and music of African-Americans—led to tremendous popular acceptance for his music, first at the Kentucky Club and then, in December 1927, at the Cotton Club. Here, Ellington and his band played shockingly racist stage shows in which black dancers, dressed as “Zulus,” did crude parodies of African dance while the Ellington band played “hot Negro music” behind them. It is to his everlasting credit that the music he created not only transcended its time

and place but went on to achieve lasting permanence even within the African-American community. Thanks to Victor's foreign affiliations with HMV, not only in England but also in It-



aly, France and Germany, Ellington's music literally traveled around the world long before its creator had the chance to do so. Even classical critic R.D. Darrell, writing in *The Gramophone* in 1928, praised an Ellington record as showing the mind of a true composer and not just the usual incoherence of a jam session.

Meanwhile, back in Chicago, other jazz musicians were creating a legacy that would also outlast their time and place. Primary among these was Earl Hines, a startlingly creative pianist who, even as early as 1923, as an 18-year-old, was inventing a style in which both hands worked independently of each other to create a complex, polyphonic style of his own. Pianist-songwriter Eubie Blake heard the teenager in his hometown of Pittsburgh and urged him to leave for the Windy City, where he quickly established himself as the reigning piano genius. But Hines had an essentially low-key personality; he wasn't completely shy of the spotlight but he didn't like it, either. And so he labored as a sideman in the dance-and-show band of Carroll Dickerson at a time when Louis Armstrong was rising quickly to fame as a leader. Armstrong, recognizing his genius, insisted on making at least one record with the Dickerson band and Hines, the Morton piece "Chicago Breakdown"; then he invited Hines to join his Hot Five on records, replacing his wife, Lil Hardin. The interplay between Armstrong and Hines during this period, especially in such pieces as "A Monday Date" and "Weather Bird," are now considered classics of jazz. But Hines, ever the more modest man, did not initially seek leadership, but rather joined the small band led by New Orleans clarinetist Jimmie Noone at the Apex Club.

Noone's band was highly unconventional for its day. As a clarinetist, Noone's tone was neither pungent nor driving, but soft, rich and unusually beautiful. In order to not have himself buried in ensembles, he avoided hiring trumpeters, but instead played the lead himself or in tandem with alto saxist Joe Poston. Hines, who received much solo space both in person and on Noone's records, quickly emerged as a



rising star. In 1929, local gangsters pushed him into accepting leadership of his own band at the Grand Terrace ballroom. Hines accepted graciously, did his best to lead a good dance and jazz orchestra for the next dozen years, but only occasionally achieved the brilliance his talents deserved because he did not dominate the band or create a popular or recognizable style.

The other unusual band in Chicago at that time was Tiny Parham and his Musicians. Parham was a Canadian-born ragtime pianist who emigrated to, and played in, Kansas City. Moving to Chicago, he quickly fell in with the older musicians from New Orleans who were making it at the time. Originally he led a band called Tiny Parham and his “Forty” Five, but by 1928 it was His Musicians. A twelve-piece orchestra, the Musicians were an eclectic group that played even more eclectic music. Mostly written by Parham himself, their book consisted of blues, stomps and unusual “mood” pieces like “Black Cat Moan,” “Bogo Rhythm,” “Bombay” and “The Head-Hunter’s Dream (An African Fantasy).” In many of these works, even in the out-and-out jazz pieces, Parham created a style that included elements of jazz, blues, dance music, klezmer and Eastern influences. Many of his pieces were in minor keys, or modulated to minor after an opening chorus; like Morton’s, they had two or three different melodies or “strains”; and they often juxtaposed these different types of music in the course of one chorus. The result was music that has never become as popular with the public or even with “trad-jazz” musicians as the music of Oliver, Morton or Armstrong, but which has stood the test of time—and which helped influence one of the most popular pieces in classical music.

In 1928, Maurice Ravel visited Chicago and, like Milhaud and Stravinsky before him, he wanted to hear some of this new American jazz. He went to hear Jimmie Noone’s band, where (as a pianist himself) he was immediately attracted to Hines’ playing. Ravel went to him between sets and offered to write a concerto for him; but, with characteristic modesty, Hines declined—which makes him possibly the only musician in history who refused a dedicatory piece by a noted composer. But Ravel was also taken to hear Tiny Parham’s band as well, and their slow, insinuating, Eastern-styled pieces fired his imagination. Inspired by what he heard, Ravel wrote his “Bolero” that year, a work which he called the greatest piece he ever wrote, “even though it contains almost no music.” Played mechanically by orchestras worldwide, Ravel was so disillusioned by the way the work was performed that, in 1932, he re-recorded it himself with the Lamoreaux Orchestra. His recording of the piece is much more leisurely, insinuating and obviously jazz-influenced than any other performance.

But one must step back and realize that even among African-American listeners, there were only a small percentage who really understood and appreciated jazz as an art form and not as simply an entertainment music. The subtlety and complexity of the music evaded the average listener as much as any pure art music, even though jazz was an art music wrapped in the packaging and form of popular entertainment.

One of the streams of popular music that fed the river of entertainment in those years was the “torch ballad,” a style of singing created by white singer Sophie Tucker during the late ‘teens. This style was marked by a strong, heartfelt delivery and sliding or “scooping” around notes that uninitiated listeners mistook for jazz. It was a style honed in the late 1920s by white singer Libby Holman and black singer Ethel Waters; but since Waters was African-American and had something of a reputation as a blues singer, this style was grafted onto a certain style of “jazz” singing later emulated by white singer Helen O’Connell and black singer Sarah Vaughan. Of course, Vaughan was a legitimate jazz artist whereas O’Connell was not, but the style was so popular that she continued to use it well into the last days of her career. It was this aspect of Vaughan’s style that deeply attracted a young, aspiring opera singer, Renée Fleming, who has since become world-famous, but whose classical style is often marred by slurs and scoops that she deigns to call her “jazz singing.” Critics have taken her to task for

this idiosyncrasy of style but, since Fleming herself calls it “jazz,” they have mistakenly labeled it as such. Thus do the recorded performances of the past influence the live performances of the present, though sometimes in odd ways.

Throughout this period, America experienced the growth of an incredibly fertile show-music style of song writing that came to be known as “Broadway.” Inspired by the hot music they heard, these composers succeeded, to a greater or lesser extent, in capturing its rhythms and feeling in their own music. Some of them, in fact, were actual jazz musicians themselves: James P. Johnson and Eubie Blake from the older generation, Thomas “Fats” Waller from the younger. Harold Arlen, though hardly a member of such august company, played jazz piano and sang with a ‘20s band called the Buffalodians. And then there were Rodgers and Hart, George and Ira Gershwin, Cole Porter (who had started out as a classical composer), Jimmy McHugh and Dorothy Fields, and Walter Donaldson. Though often ignored today, Donaldson captured the era perfectly in such pieces as “Lonely Melody,” “Clementine (From New Orleans),” and one of the great classics of the era, “Makin’ Whoopee.” Jerome Kern bridged the gap between the revue and musicals with “books” when “Show Boat” premiered in 1928.

Yet it was George Gershwin who became a pop and jazz icon. The son of Russian-Jewish immigrants, Gershwin was raised in the burgeoning ragtime and jazz worlds; his early compositions, such as “I’ll Build a Stairway to Paradise,” uses odd chromatic harmonies and jazz-like rhythms without being actual jazz. Yet as time went on, his tunes proved to be excellent fodder for improvisations, and in 1924 he introduced the first American jazz-classical hybrid, his *Rhapsody in Blue*, introduced at Aeolian Hall by the Paul Whiteman Orchestra in early 1924. Though he did not actually score the *Rhapsody*—being unskilled in orchestration at the time, this task was given to Whiteman’s staff arranger, Ferde Grofé, who himself later wrote a pops-classical standard, the *Grand Canyon Suite*—he did write its odd juxtaposed melodies and rhythms. It was greeted with mixed reviews from critics, but became an instant sensation with the public, so much so that the Whiteman band, with Gershwin at the piano, recorded an abridged version (cut down from 13 minutes to eight) for Victor that year. Gershwin recorded the entire *Rhapsody* as an extended solo for a piano roll company, Duo-Art, in 1925, and re-recorded it electrically with Whiteman in 1927. By that year, Gershwin had already written his second most famous composition, the tone poem “An American in Paris,” which many consider to be his masterpiece. This was recorded for Victor by a studio orchestra led by the versatile Nathaniel Shilkret, with Gershwin playing the small Celeste part. A year later, he followed with his Piano Concerto, also recorded by Whiteman, this time for Columbia but without the composer at the piano.

There were then, and later, much finer jazz-classical syntheses, among them John Alden Carpenter’s ballet “Skyscrapers,” Leonard Bernstein’s “Prelude, Fugue and Riffs,” Duke Ellington’s “Night Creature,” Charles Mingus’ “Revelations” and George Russell’s “Listen to the Silence,” but none of these have ever captured the imagination of the general public like Gershwin’s “Rhapsody” and “American in Paris.” They have remained iconic fixtures in not only American, but world, music.

Hillbilly and Folk recordings: The birth of the Fellaheen

Though jazz and blues music thrilled a large segment of Americans and Europeans during the 1920s, there was another, larger populace that did not respond with the same excitement. Poor white workers in the South, West and Midwest at that time had their own musical traditions that were poles apart from jazz, though not necessarily from the blues.

As far back as 1908, a folk music researcher named John Lomax recorded a black saloonkeeper in San Antonio, Texas on an Edison portable cylinder machine. One of his songs, “Home on the Range,” was published in 1910 and became a national hit. Twenty years after that recording session, John Lomax and his son Alan were part of a Federally-funded program that would eventually create the socio-musical impetus to overwhelm and marginalize both classical and jazz art music.

Carl Engel, chief of the Library of Congress’ Music Division, spoke at a luncheon given by wealthy supporters of the Philadelphia Orchestra. Engel was trying to convince them to help establish a national folk music archive, using as leverage the fact that folk music had been used as the basis for classical compositions for centuries. Engel’s appeal moved the Women’s Committee of the orchestra so much that they voted to underwrite an Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress, with operations beginning on 1 July 1928. Engel chose as director of the program a Harvard graduate, Robert Winslow Gordon. An experimenter like Edison, Gordon brought recording cylinders into the field, making recordings at San Francisco wharves and Georgia prayer meetings. Over the next five years he amassed an astonishing 1,000 field recordings before turning over his duties to John Lomax, who succeeded him in 1933. The Lomax story, however, will be discussed in the next chapter.

Meanwhile, a man named Ralph Peer convinced mighty Victor to enter the field of professional rural singers. Having already made a commitment to the blues by signing Ida Cox and Victoria Spivey, Victor was interested in cornering yet another market, so they were receptive to Peer’s overtures. Previously, the only name “hillbilly” singer on records was Vernon Dalhart, an operatically-trained tenor from Tennessee, who had made a number of records for various labels, including Okeh and Gennett. He, too, came to Victor in 1927, where he had a surprise hit with “The Prisoner’s Song.” But Peer wanted authentic rural artists, not operatic translators of rural music. He signed two of the most legendary artists of his time, the Carter Family and a former railroad brakeman named Jimmie Rodgers.

Both sold well for Victor, but Rodgers in particular created a boom not unlike that of Bessie Smith for Columbia. People in rural areas—and there were hundreds of thousands of them, a vast untapped market—bought the Rodgers discs just as quickly as city folk bought the Louis Armstrong and Jelly Roll Morton records. Rodgers’ songs were unsophisticated but heartfelt, songs of lost love, the hobo life, having fun at juke-joints. In short, it was music that resonated in the lives of everyday people, the kind that Sinclair Lewis lampooned in *Babbitt*. But it would lead to greater things in the future.

Radio, Depression and the eclipse of an industry

The growth of radio as an entertainment medium in the 1920s was a phenomenon as great as that of television thirty years later or iPods forty years after that. Americans could access news, comedy and musical entertainment, including live broadcasts as well as transcribed musical shows, from the top bands and singers of the era. Indeed, it was the lure of a live radio hookup that convinced Duke Ellington to accept the job at the Cotton Club, despite a pay scale that was not among the leaders of the time. A great many entertainment bands such as Ben Bernie’s, Fred Waring’s, George Olsen’s and the Coon-Sanders Nighthawks out of Chicago dominated the airwaves, though none of them were really jazz orchestras.

Classical music, serious and light, were also part of the mix. In addition to the New York Philharmonic, there were also broadcasts by chamber groups, soloists and singers—especially singers. The radio networks had little chance of attracting big-name operatic artists, as the Vitaphone shorts had, but there were classically-trained pop singers who gave audiences

a mixture of both kinds of music, what we now call “crossover.” Among these were soprano Jeanette MacDonald, mezzo Vaughan de Leath, tenor James Melton and baritone John Charles Thomas, the last-named a survivor of Edison Diamond-Discs. Even Lucy Isabelle Marsh was resuscitated for radio, and the most popular white vocal group of the day—The Revelers—was actually comprised of four classically-trained singers, among them tenor Charles Harrison and bass Wilfred Glenn. Today it sounds awfully funny to hear these “proper” voices singing jazzy tunes and ballads, but in their day they were well-accepted.

Of course, there were other singers, too, who had a very different bias: show singers like Al Jolson, Libby Holman and Eddie Cantor, pop-blues chanteuses like Ethel Waters, and white jazz singers like Bing Crosby and Cliff Edwards. Crosby, who later mellowed his approach to become the most popular “crooner” of his day, was actually a jazz singer of fairly high merit: even the Austin High jazz gang of Eddie Condon and Bud Freeman thought Crosby one of the finest jazz singers around, *if* he chose to sing jazz. Edwards was an entirely different kind of songbird. Raised on a steady diet of hot music, his aggressive, swinging, no-holds-barred style cut across racial lines to make him the highest-paid white singer of his day. Like Elvis Presley three decades later, the entertainment industry had found a white man who could “sing Negro.” Sadly, changing popular tastes and his unfortunate cocaine habit combined to marginalize and impoverish Edwards by the mid-1930s; but Walt Disney, an early fan, magnanimously revived his career by hiring him to play the part of Jiminy Cricket in his 1940 animated feature, “Pinocchio.” Edwards ended his career as yet another “invisible voice,” singing on the radio and later, television, mostly as Jiminy Cricket but sometimes in the jazz he loved and lived.

By the end of the decade, CBS had been formed to compete with media giant NBC-RCA. Records, which were then only an adjunct to sheet music and piano rolls rather than a separate industry unto itself, began to decline in sales. Victor’s loss of “King of Jazz” Whiteman to rival Columbia also didn’t help: sales of Whiteman records, the majority of which had little if any relationship to jazz, had help offset sales of true jazz and classical music. Now Victor had only Jimmie Rodgers to offset sales of its Morton, Parham and Johnny Dodds sides, not to mention Toscanini and Stokowski.

Something had to give; and the stock market crash of October 1929 was that thing. Throwing in the towel, Victor sold its entire business, stock and catalog to industry giant RCA. David Sarnoff, RCA’s president and CEO, was ecstatic: he now had a media outlet for NBC artists. But record sales during 1930 plummeted for all companies, resulting in a virtual bloodbath of depleted artist rosters. Columbia let Bessie Smith, Clara Smith, Paul Whiteman and all jazz artists save Armstrong out of their contracts. The new combine of “RCA Victor” was even more drastic, letting go virtually their entire stable of jazz names—Red Nichols, Jelly Roll Morton, Tiny Parham, Johnny Dodds and Bix Beiderbecke—as well as most of their classical artists. Of the two dozen major opera singers who recorded for the label, only popular baritone Lawrence Tibbett survived the cut, and he only because he had made a name for himself in a hit movie, “Cuban Love Song.” Gone were violinists Kreisler and Elman, only the younger and more popular Heifetz being retained. Also gone were cornerstones of their orchestral catalog, Coates, Hertz, Mengelberg, even media giant Toscanini.

The two conductors who survived the cut were Serge Koussevitzky and Leopold Stokowski and, in those choices, one can see a trend towards what sounded good on records as opposed to what was truly great conducting. Both leaders stressed opulence of sound over brilliance of interpretation and, in a world of diminishing returns on records, opulence was what sold.